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ABSTRACT

Based on Joseph Conrad's novel "Heart of Darkness," this lesson plan presents activities designed to help students understand that critics have debated some of Conrad's choices in the novel; and that the novel reflects the world as Conrad saw it. The main activity of the lesson involves students rewriting the ending of the novel so that Marlow tells Kurtz's fiance the truth about his last words. It includes objectives, materials, procedures, adaptations, discussion questions, evaluation methods, extension activities, annotations of suggested readings and web links, vocabulary, and related academic standards and benchmarks addressed in the lesson plan. The lesson plan also contains a description of a video clip related to the lesson, comprehension questions related to the video clip, and answers to those comprehension questions. (RS)

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TITLE OF LESSON PLAN:

Heart of Darkness

LENGTH OF LESSON: One class period

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

SUBJECT AREA: Literature

CREDIT: Summer Productions, Inc.

OBJECTIVES: Students will understand the following:

1. Critics have debated some of Conrad's choices in *Heart of Darkness*.

2. Students will understand how the novel reflects the world as Conrad saw it.

MATERIALS:
For this lesson, you will need:

Reference materials about colonization throughout the world

PROCEDURE:

1. Elicit from students their emotional responses and analytic interpretations of Conrad's ending for the novel. As this activity proceeds, students will have a chance to write their own ending for the novel. (In Conrad's version, Marlowe decides not to tell Kurtz's fiancé about her betrothed's final degradation. When she asks what Kurtz's final words were, Marlow wants to say, "The horror! The horror!" but he can't. Instead, he tells her that Kurtz spoke her name.)

2. After students discuss their responses and interpretations of Conrad's ending, share with them critics' comments on the ending. Critics have often written about Marlow's white lie at the end. Some critics say it illustrates Conrad's ideas about how we all must be protected from the savagery inside us, just as Marlowe protected Kurtz's fiancé from the ugly truth about the decline of the man she intended to marry. Other critics, however, call it the novel's one striking moment of weakness, when Conrad just couldn't bear to keep telling the novel's heavy story.

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3. With the preceding discussion in mind, as your students to write an alternative scene in which Marlow does tell Kurtz's fiancé the truth, not only about Kurtz's last words but also about everything Kurtz had become.

4. As students start prewriting, ask them to consider the following:

- What words Marlow might use in talking to Kurtz's fiancé.
- What feelings he might have while he talks to her and how he might show or not show those feelings
- How Kurtz's fiancé might react to what she hears from Marlow
- What might happen between Marlow and Kurtz's fiancé after he discloses the truth

5. When students proceed to drafting, encourage them to stay with Conrad's tone and writing style.

6. After time for peer editing and revision, ask volunteers to read their new endings aloud, leading into a discussion about the choices that students made.

ADAPTATIONS:

Younger students might engage in a class discussion of alternative endings but should not be expected to draft and revise written work.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Some critics believe that in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad illustrates how "the darkness of the landscape can lead to the darkness of social corruption." What does this statement mean? How can one's environment affect one's actions, feelings, and morals? Is this statement believable or not? Have you ever experienced a change in yourself that resulted from a change in your environment? What kind of change was it?

2. *Heart of Darkness* seems to blur the line between the so-called "advanced" society of Europe and the "primitive" society of Africa. What makes one culture "civilized" and another "savage" in the eyes of the world? Are these distinctions valid? Do you think that the culture you live in is "advanced" or "civilized"? Why?

3. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is depicted as an upstanding European who has been transformed by his time in the jungle—away from his home, away from familiar people and food, and away from any community moral support that might have helped prevent him from becoming such a tyrant. There was nothing and no one, in essence, to keep him on the straight and narrow. Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? Was there ever a time in which you felt alone, in a strange environment, or different from everyone else around you? How did that experience affect you or change you? Did you find yourself pulled toward base, cruel instincts as Kurtz was? What did you do to cope with those feelings?

4. Kurtz's dying words are a cryptic whisper: "The horror, the horror." What "horror" could Kurtz have been talking about? Is there more than one possibility? Why do you think Conrad made this scene so ambiguous?

5. Some readers claim that *Heart of Darkness* is strictly a political novella. Others, however, say it's really a story about the human condition. Can a work of fiction be interpreted in different ways? Should readers consider the author's intent when analyzing a story?

6. *Heart of Darkness* can sometimes seem to readers like an incredibly dark, depressing story that paints civilizations in a very negative light. Did it seem this way to you, or did the story contain any positive moments? If so, what were they? Why did they seem positive?

EVALUATION:

You may evaluate each student's written work using the following three-point rubric:

Three points: new ending resolves all loose ends; writing clearly retains Conrad's tone and style; no errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

Two points: new ending resolves most loose ends; writing somewhat retains Conrad's tone and style; some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

One point: new ending does not resolve loose ends; writing does not retain Conrad's tone and style; many errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

You can ask your students to contribute to the assessment rubric by determining the minimum length of new endings.

EXTENSION:

Giving Voice to Africans

Some readers of *Heart of Darkness* have argued that the story is racist because Conrad's African characters rarely speak and have little or no individual identities. Invite your students to discuss this criticism of the novel and to revise the novel to counter the critical attack. Ask each student to imagine that he or she is one of the African characters from the novel and now has an opportunity to write a journal entry describing experiences in the novel from his or her perspective. Advise students that their journal entries should not be retellings of scenes from the novel; rather, students should create scenes that logically might have occurred during the course of the novel but that Conrad chose not to depict. Be sure to encourage students to communicate the feelings of the characters they are pretending to be. When they are finished, ask a few volunteers to share their work with the class.

Colonial Conditions
King Leopold II's ownership of the Congo is certainly not the only example of colonialism. Even the United States began as a group of 13 colonies. Ask your students to use the library and Internet to learn about other instances of colonization in the world. Students' research should include the conditions under which natives lived when rulers from other lands controlled them. Then ask students to write imaginary dramatic scenes that could have taken place in the colonies they researched. The natives' actions and speeches should reflect the colonial conditions of the colonies.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Out of Africa
Isak Dinesen. Modern Library, 1992.
Out of Africa is Isak Dinesen's memoir of her years in Africa, from 1914 to 1931, on a 4,000-acre coffee plantation in the hills near Nairobi. This classic book presents the portrait of a strong, determined, sensitive woman on whom a rich, dramatic landscape and way of life made deep impressions.

A Joseph Conrad Companion
Joseph Orr and Ted Billy. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999.
This in-depth discussion of Conrad's life and travels includes descriptions of his time in the Congo and explores the ways in which his experiences affected *Heart of Darkness*.

WEB LINKS:

Heart of Darkness
This electronic version of *Heart of Darkness* is a scholarly edition. It includes links to vocabulary words, themes, and other study information including lecture notes.
http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~csicseri/

Heart of Darkness - The Radio Adaptation
A dramatization you can listen to over the Internet. The script is located at site as well as study notes.
http://www.irdp.co.uk/darksound.htm

Project Gutenberg
The works of Conrad listed here under author.
http://promo.net/pg/_authors/i-_conrad_joseph_.html

Apocalypse Now
This web site explores *Apocalypse Now* and some of its influences including *Heart of Darkness*.
http://film.tierranet.com/films/a.now/

VOCABULARY:

apocalypse
An imminent cosmic cataclysm.
Context:
In the film *Apocalypse Now*, director Francis Ford Coppola attempted to translate the events of *Heart of Darkness* into similar events during the war in Vietnam.

colonialism
Control by one power over a dependent area or people.
Context:
Colonialism in Africa was troubled by the greed of the Europeans who dominated the continent.

novella
A work of fiction intermediate in length and complexity between a short story and a novel.
Context:
Heart of Darkness is a novella packed with memorable descriptions of the jungle.

primeval
Of or relating to the earliest ages in the world's history.
Context:
Conrad's novella is the story of a journey up a great river into a primeval jungle.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the reading process.

Benchmarks: Identifies and analyzes the philosophical assumptions and basic beliefs underlying an author's work.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts.

Benchmarks:
Applies reading skills and strategies to a variety of literary texts (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, supernatural tales, satires, parodies, plays, American literature, British literature, world and ancient literature).

Benchmark:
Recognizes archetypes and symbols across literary texts (e.g., heroes, beneficence of nature, "dawn").

Benchmark:
Understands the effects of complex literary devices and techniques on the overall quality of a work (e.g., tone, irony, mood, figurative language, allusion, diction, dialogue, symbolism, point of view, style).

Benchmark:
Understands historical and cultural influences on literary works.

Benchmark:
Makes abstract connections between his or her own life and the characters, events, motives, and causes of conflict in texts.

Benchmark:
Relates personal response to the text with that seemingly intended by the author.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: life science

Standard: Knows about the diversity and unity that characterize life.

Benchmarks:
Knows how organisms are classified into a hierarchy of groups and subgroups based on similarities that reflect their evolutionary relationships (e.g., shared derived characteristics inherited from a common ancestor; degree of kinship estimated from the similarity of DNA sequences).

Grade Level: 6-8, 9-12

Subject Area: technology

Standard: Understands the relationships among science, technology, society, and the individual.

Benchmarks:

Benchmark 6-8:
Knows that science cannot answer all questions and technology cannot solve all human problems or meet all human needs.

Benchmark 9-12:
Knows that science and technology are pursued for different purposes.

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Video Information and Comprehension Questions

Video Description
Europeans painted a noble picture of their occupation of Africa. Explore how Conrad's classic novella exposed the hypocrisy and brutality of colonials who harvested gold, ivory, and diamonds at the expense of five million Africans.

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Download Comprehension Questions & Answers ⓘ

The Comprehension Questions are available to download as an RTF file. You can save the file to your desktop and open it in a word processing program

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TITLE OF VIDEO:
Heart of Darkness

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. Where does *Heart of Darkness* take place?

2. When the slave trade ended, Europeans continued to exploit the continent of Africa. What African resources inspired this exploitation?

3. What was the popular opinion about colonialism in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

4. What were Joseph Conrad's own negative experiences with one country's control over another?

5. What personal experiences during Conrad's twenties may have influenced *Heart of Darkness*?

6. What aspects of *Heart of Darkness* have led some critics to label Joseph Conrad a racist?

7. Darwin's theory of evolution led some Europeans to worry about "degeneration"—humans reverting into their animal ancestors. How does Conrad play on these fears in *Heart of Darkness*?

8. What might be some of the beneficial applications of cloning?

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Heart of Darkness

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. Where does *Heart of Darkness* take place?
*Heart of Darkness*takes place in what are now the cities of Boma, Kinshasa, and Kisangani in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. At the time the novel takes place, those cities were all part of a colony personally owned by Belgium's King Leopold II.

2. When the slave trade ended, Europeans continued to exploit the continent of Africa. What African resources inspired this exploitation?
After the slave trade ended, Europeans continued to exploit the continent of Africa for its ivory, gold, silver, diamonds, and rubber.

3. What was the popular opinion about colonialism in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries?
Most Europeans believed that it was their destiny to control other peoples. Some considered it their obligation, furthermore, to convert Africans to Christianity. This obligation was known as "the white man's burden."

4. What were Joseph Conrad's own negative experiences with one country's control over another?
As a young boy, Joseph Conrad and his family were exiled from Poland to northwest Russia because his parents spoke out against Russian control of their country.

5. What personal experiences during Conrad's twenties may have influenced *Heart of Darkness*?
At 22, Conrad took a job navigating a wood-burning steamer up the Congo River, where he saw thousands of men being forced to work as porters for King Leopold. The sight of so many men carrying heavy loads over great distances against their will appalled Conrad—and may have led to his writing *Heart of Darkness.*

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6. What aspects of *Heart of Darkness* have led some critics to label Joseph Conrad a racist?
Joseph Conrad's African characters in *Heart of Darkness* do not speak and have little or no individual identities. This has led some critics to accuse Conrad of "dehumanizing" his African characters.

7. Darwin's theory of evolution led some Europeans to worry about "degeneration"—humans reverting into their animal ancestors. How does Conrad play on these fears in *Heart of Darkness*?
Conrad plays on these fears by creating the character of Kurtz, a refined European who studied art, science, and journalism but eventually became a cruel, savage, animalistic man after he spent time in the jungle. This character was frightening to many of Conrad's European readers.

8. What might be some of the beneficial applications of cloning?
People who can't reproduce naturally could clone themselves to produce offspring. Animals from endangered species could be cloned to prevent extinction. There would be financial advantages to cloning livestock animals, rather than creating original, genetically altered breeds.

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